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ABSTRACT

This case study examined the shift of the communication major at Wesleyan College (Georgia) from a traditional emphasis to an interdisciplinary focus. Fuzziness of the image of communication as an academic discipline and faculty and administrative concerns about the degree of connectedness of the curriculum in relation to the liberal arts led to the creation of an interdisciplinary major firmly grounded in the liberal arts. In an effort to construct a unique, interdisciplinary communication major in keeping with the mission of this small liberal arts college, the administration appointed a committee of faculty from almost every academic discipline to enumerate realistic objectives and to implement the necessary changes. The committee became involved in extensive meetings, research, formal and informal discussions, and sessions with a consultant. The result was a new communication major that contains seven communication courses and eight liberal arts courses, whereas before eleven speech/communication courses and only one liberal arts course were required. It is felt that this significantly changed blend of communication with the liberal arts will better prepare students for the job market or for graduate school. (Several catalog course listings are included to illustrate curriculum changes.) (KEH)

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THE EVOLUTION OF AN INTERDISCIPLINARY MAJOR: A CASE STUDY

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The Evolution of an Interdisciplinary Communication Major:
A Case Study

This paper was motivated by the Cheney report, 50 Hours: A Core Curriculum for College Students. Cheney attempts to provide for high school students a measurement by which to select a college based on the quality of its "core" requirements. Curriculum profiles of two diverse colleges areused to illustrate different emphases of core requirements--i.e., Columbia University and Richland Community College, Dallas, Texas. Several times throughout the report, the phrase "intellectual design" appears. Later, the writers of the report refer to "connectedness" in curriculum. One of the major concerns of the report addresses differences in core requirements at even the most prestigious schools across the United States. The lack of standardization of core curriculum and the concern for connectedness are key themes. Cheney includes in her core curriculum the following disciplines: 18 hours of cultures and civilizations, 12 hours of foreign language, 6 hours of mathematics, 8 hours of natural sciences, and 6 hours of the social sciences. At no point in Cheney's list of core requirements does she address the discipline of communication as the oral tradition. Thus, can we assume that she does not perceive oral communication as intricately related to the liberal arts. This paper is a case study of Wesleyan College and the perceptions by faculty and administrators of our previous "traditional" communication major. Additionally, the paper will discuss the changes in focus from a major with technical specialization to an interdisciplinary major firmly grounded in the liberal arts.

Perceptions by Wesleyan faculty about communication as anacademic discipline were fuzzy. Communication did not have a clearly focused image. Faculty were confused as to how it fit into speech, rhetoric or drama. Others combined their notion of communication with theatre as in the traditional "speech and theatre departments." Whereas some saw communication as a social science, closely affiliated with the disciplines of sociology and especially psychology, still others viewed communication as inclusive of "broadcasting" and "platform speaking." Speech to most Wesleyan faculty symbolized a vocational skill to be likened to Computer Science and/or Business Communication. Communication was not viewed as interdisciplinary in its own content, but narrow and specialized. In Careers for Speech Communication Graduates, Al Weitzel recognizes the fuzziness of the discipline when he says, "What we have here is an image

problem. An image is, simply, a mental picture that is largely subjective, and it is based on available information. In the same book, McBath and Burhans reported a 1975 study that was discouraging. The study reflects, in general, the following perceptions of the speech communication discipline. Respondents

1. perceived the discipline . . . as largely performance oriented.

2. found it difficult to suggest jobs for . . . majors.

3. perceived only a limited application of speech communication to the business world" (pp. 9-10).

As Wesleyan College began to strive for preeminence by the year 2000, administrators wrestled with the true meaning of communication in the liberal arts. Given the diverse campus perceptions of the communication major, could it survive the liberal arts test? The major was growing--in 1984 there were four majors; by 1988 the majors had climbed to 29. Currently, communication has 37 majors on the Wesleyan Campus of about 450 women. The communication major is "visible"; it is the third largest major on campus, superseded only by Education and Business. The popularity of the major led to many questions by the administration: "Why the acceleration in campus popularity?" "Was the major too easy academically?" "Was the faculty victim of grade inflation?" "Were students misinformed about what they could do with communication after graduation?" "What kind of teacher was the one full-time person?" "Was this interest in communication just an academic 'fad'?"

Faculty and administrators perceived the previous communication major as too specialized. The major was divided into two emphases: Speech Communication (36 hours) and Public Relations (42 hours). The Speech Communication focus included courses in "general speech" such as Fundamentals of Speech Communication, Interpersonal, Basic News Writing, Mass Media, Persuasion, Public Relations, Oral Interpretation, Senior Seminar, and English Composition: Fiction, Poetry, and Drama. Also students were to choose three courses or nine hours from Voice and Diction, Discussion and Debate, Field Studies, Statistics, Psychology of Personality, Social Psychology, Formal Organizations, and Marriage and the Family. Students were encouraged to complete a double major coupled with such disciplines as English, history, psychology, or business. Most students who chose this emphasis sought careers in media (on air, production or sales), counseling, journalism, or personnel.

The second emphasis in communication--Public Relations--combined communication courses with Business--i.e., marketing, advertising, economics. Also included in this focus was a course in photography as well as an Advanced Journalism course. Strongly recommended electives encouraged were Business Law, Human Resources Management, Historical Survey of English Literature in addition to courses in psychology and sociology previously mentioned in the Speech Communication emphasis. Over 75% percent of the communication majors opted for this choice and almost all have found jobs in some area of public relations.

In the case of both emphases in communication, faculty and administrators, partially through internship discussion, heard vocational "lingo"--words like copywriter, teleprompter, cameraman, corporate relations, image. This dialogue prompted assumptions on behalf of faculty and administrators that communication majors deal more with application than theoretical concerns. Also, there has been a continued apprehension on behalf of faculty and administration that critical thinking does not take place in the communication classrooms or that there is no discussion of "connectedness" of curriculum. Many of these issues are the ones expressed by Cheney and her staff in the NEH's 50 HOURS: ARE THERE MISSING LINKS? (pp. 11-15).

At Wesleyan, last year's Acting Academic Dean, Dr. Priscilla Danheiser, stated her concerns about how communication fit into the liberal arts curriculum, commenting that "communication for her reflected a professionalism rather than a general, broad spectrum to learning." Also she was concerned that there be a more obvious focus on written communication as well as on oral communication. When asked her definition of "liberal arts," she responded "talent development of students." A further description of "talent development" included how well schools develop the talent students have--for example, critical and analytical thinking skills provide a foundation for life-long learning. Students need to be prepared to question and to be understood as well as to acquire an understanding for history and civilization .... Students need to be able to veer off in any direction.

The fuzziness of the image of communication as an academic discipline and faculty and administrative concerns about the degree of connectedness of the curriculum in relation to the liberal arts led to the creation of an interdisciplinary major firmly grounded in the liberal arts. In an effort to construct a unique, interdisciplinary communication major in keeping with the mission of our small, liberal arts college, the administration appointed a committee of faculty from almost every

academic discipline--viz., art, business, communication, education, English, mathematics, political science, and psychology. The committee then studied Wesleyan's communication major and compared it to others in a number of college catalogs, particularly but not exclusively those from small, liberal arts colleges; discussed with faculty in other disciplines not represented on the committee ways that Wesleyan's communication major could support other majors; decided on a consultant, ultimately choosing a Woodrow Wilson Fellow who serves as a consultant in communication and higher education and whose formal education is in history and philosophy; and discussed with local business and professional leaders in public relations and mass communication what training they want graduates in communication to have.

In its research, the committee studied a proposal from the Speech Communication Association listing content areas which are essential to an undergraduate communication curriculum, focusing on the five core courses which should be required of all undergraduates in speech communication: public speaking, interpersonal communication, small group communication, mass media, and communication and rhetorical theory. In addition, the committee reviewed the literature on communication, reading both specialized communication perspectives and approaches and those examining communication as a bona fide academic liberal arts discipline.

After meetings, research, formal and informal discussions, and sessions with the consultant, the committee enumerated the objectives upon which it wanted to build the new communication major. Paramount among the objectives was the provision that students majoring in communication graduate with a broad liberal arts education and that the major itself include, in addition to traditional communication courses, upper-level liberal arts courses. A few other objectives include the following:

1. To improve students' ability to write, speak, research, and analyze;

2. To de-emphasize specialized communication fields such as journalism, public relations, and mass media--limiting study in these areas to introductory courses; and among others,

3. To prepare students for graduate school in communication.

Further, the committee encouraged awareness and practical application of a campus-wide communication-across-the-curriculum program, a suggestion which the entire campus faculty has since adopted as part of its new general education curriculum.

To understand fully how Wesleyan has changed its communication major, one needs to examine a few earlier but recent catalogs. In the 1982-83 catalog, the speech communication major consisted of thirty-three semester hours (i.e., eleven three-hour courses), five required speech courses, three required communication courses, English 102, and two speech and/or communication electives. The required speech/communication courses follow:

SPEECH 101: Fundamentals of Speech
204: Speech and Language Development and Their Disorders
308: Introduction to Oral Interpretation
309: Public Speaking
320: Discussion and Debate

COMMUNICATION 102: Principles of Communication
215: Mass Media
220: Persuasive Communication

By 1988-89, communication courses no longer bore different subject designations ("speech" or "communication") and the major had developed two concentrations--a thirty-six semester hour speech communication major and a forty-five semester hour public relations major. In addition to English 102 the required courses in the speech communication concentration follow:

COMMUNICATION 101: Fundamentals of Speech Communication
102: Principles of Interpersonal Communication
211: Public Relations
215: Mass Media
220: Persuasion
308: Introduction to Oral Interpretation
309: Public Speaking
499: Senior Seminar

To complete this major, students elected nine hours from designated courses in communication, psychology, and sociology.

In addition to six communication courses (COM 101, 102, 211, 215, 220, and 499) and English 102 required in both concentrations, the public relations major required the following courses, with no electives in the major:

COMMUNICATION 207: Basic News Writing
209: Advanced Journalism
401: Public Relations Case Studies and Problems
452: Field Studies (Internship)

ART 275: Photography

BUSINESS 303: Principles of Marketing
306: Advertising Strategy

ECONOMICS 201: Principles of Economics

However, our new major, effective last year, contains forty-five semester hours nearly evenly divided between communication and other liberal arts courses, but with no specialized concentrations. The seven required and one optional communication courses include the five courses recommended as essential for an undergraduate communication curriculum by the SCA:

COMMUNICATION 101: Fundamentals of Speech Communication
102: Interpersonal Communication (including small group discussion)
203: Introduction to Journalism
215: Mass Media
310: Advanced Public Speaking and Rhetorical Analysis
* 311: Public Relations
340: Persuasion: Theory and Analysis
452: Internship

* Either COM 311 or SOC 309.

The non-communication courses consist of six junior- or senior-level courses in English (one literature; one writing), history, political science, psychology, and sociology, and of two sophomore-level courses in art and philosophy:

ENGLISH 300- or 400-level literature elective
ENGLISH 356 or 351: Advanced Expository Writing or Creative Writing

HISTORY 315 or 401: Contemporary America or The Contemporary World

POLITICAL SCIENCE 304 or 311: International Politics or Comparative Politics

PSYCHOLOGY 303: Social Psychology

* SOCIOLOGY 309: Formal Organizations

PHILOSOPHY 223: Ethics

ART 201: Visual Communication

* Either SOC 309 or COM 211.

Wesleyan's general education curriculum will prepare students majoring in communication for these upper-level liberal arts courses without having to take any hidden electives.

Instituting these most recent changes has not reduced the number of communication majors; instead, the number of majors continues to increase. Though we do not anticipate major changes in the program, we have considered--and probably will make--one change: instead of allowing students their one option of choosing between COM 311 (Public Relations) and SOC 309 (Formal Organizations), we may require the formal organization (SOC) course and allow students to take the public relations (COM) course as an elective outside of the major. The reason for this change is that it seems logical to require students to understand the working of an organization before they try to serve as a liaison between the organization and the public. An interesting aside, however, is that no student has yet chosen the sociology option which we will likely soon be requiring.

The communication major at Wesleyan over the last decade has changed dramatically, including more liberal arts courses as part of the major. The 1982-83 major required ten speech/communication courses and one liberal arts course. The 1988-89 speech communication concentration required from eight to eleven communication courses out of twelve, with most students taking eleven communication courses and one liberal arts course. The 1988-89 public relations concentration required ten communication courses, three business courses, and two liberal arts courses. But the new communication major, with the anticipated change requiring the sociology course, contains only seven communication courses and eight liberal arts courses. The result of this change, we think, is that

our students will be better prepared for the job market or for graduate school because of the blend of communication with the liberal arts.

Earlier in the paper we asked the question," Can we assume that Cheney does not perceive oral communication as intricately related to the liberal arts?" Perhaps a broader question to ponder would be if the diverse image that the discipline faces by faculty, administrators and the general public is not the same problem that Cheney faced when choosing not to include a specific course in oral communication as part of her 50 hours? At the 1990 summer conference for Small College Faculty at Hope College, Holland, Michigan, entitled "Essential Curriculum Conference in Communication," a well-known, published scholar in Mass Communication, questioned how clearly-defined our discipline is. He pointed out that even the most accomplished professionals in all areas of the communication discipline are struggling with its identity.

We, the authors of this paper, believe the time has come to solidify, to define, to articulate just who we are so that internally we can reach some consensus and pride as to our identity. We challenge you to join us in this difficult, sometimes even painful task of finding a more universal definition of this exciting, on-the-cutting-edge discipline of communication.